

Extended Essay English B Category III

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Research Question: *The analysis of how unalterable human nature is when movement, materialism and illusions in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel “The Great Gatsby” is compared to the human attributes of today’s world*

EDA NAZLI GENÇ

TED Ankara College Foundation High School

CONTENTS

Abstract.....	3
I. Introduction.....	4
II. Movement.....	6
III. Materialism.....	7
IV. Illusion.....	10
V. Conclusion.....	12
Bibliography.....	13

Abstract

In choosing F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel "The Great Gatsby", the similarities between the time of the setting and today have been taken into consideration. The "roaring twenties" can be related with the beginning of modern times in which most habits such as inclination to consumption started to be shaped. Hence, it is likely that the habit of consumption, which has come to be a general concern, can be traced back to those ages. Since the literary work gives the reader the opportunity to have almost a live experience, the better understanding of this novel would provide better understanding of today's reality.

The plot develops through the opinions and observations of Nick Carraway as he moves into West Egg. His acquaintance with Jay Gatsby pulls him into the restless age. The name Gatsby becomes an expression fit for the Jazz Era with lavish parties and gambling for fortune. Gatsby's neighbor, Nick can see that Gatsby's mansion, the parties he hosts, the clothes he wears and the car he drives show his lack of taste in spite of the wealth he owns. This conflict can only be observed after comparing the newly rich like Gatsby, most of whose income can be traced back to illegal deeds, and the old rich like Nick's cousin Daisy and her husband Tom Buchanan. While Nick searches for his place between the dwellers of West Egg and East Egg, he questions the place of materialism in the society and the artificial nature of human relationships which are reflected on the perception of reality.

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Introduction:

Focusing on the early years of the twentieth century, it can be observed that social life reflects the consequences of The World War I and the beginnings of The World War II. For the people who have lived in that era there is a popular phrase called “The Lost Generation” credited to Gertrude Stein. It defines aimlessness and loss of morality for after The World War I, the outcome showed a worldwide loss and the moral guidelines no longer held reliability. Thus virtue lost its appeal and corruption took its toll. As a result of this, the focus turned away from ideal and spiritual to profitable and worldly. In other words, the individual overshadowed the society. However, this was mainly in terms of gain rather than equality.

Apparently, the setting of the novel “The Great Gatsby” written by F. Scott Fitzgerald reflects the roaring twenties in context and style. While it may not have been intentional, there are unmistakable references to the moral decay and social turbulence of the Jazz Era in Fitzgerald’s novel which can be attributed to the fact that he lived in that era and was himself a part of The Lost Generation. The novel can be related to the rising individualism, as one of the characters, Nick Carraway, is the narrator and his personal opinions direct plot development in the novel. Moreover, the images and metaphors used in the novel can also be given as examples for they reflect personal impressions and are not general statements. Nick’s experiences with other characters show importance in comparing different attributes of the time and in examining social conflicts in classes and rights. Even though capitalism and liberalism support the rise of the individual by economic means, equal opportunities only cause to expand the discrepancy between the lives of the low classes and the high classes. As the song in the novel goes:

“One thing’s sure and nothing’s surer

The rich get richer and the poor get - children

In the meantime,

In between time – ” (Fitzgerald, 102)

The rise of the importance of personal gain in the novel is reflected on the relationships between people. One’s place in the society is decided according to the quality and the quantity of possessions one has. This serves as an opportunity to buy one’s place in the society by making quick money. Black market and gambling are popular choices to make large amounts of income in a short span of time. Mr. Wolfshiem can be an example to these methods because he is said to have fixed the World Series in 1919 and played with the fate of fifty million people. (Fitzgerald, 79-80)

The elite class, the ones who have inherited their wealth from their ancestors, are not in favor of the newly rich as they seem to have no taste and manners. The high class members such as Tom Buchanan are observed to show a defensive attitude which turns discriminative and shallow as he makes references to “The Rise of The Colored Empires”. This is the book which signals the sharpened edges of disintegration that leads to the World War II.

The disintegration in the society can also be observed in the clash between old values and new rebellious attitudes in relation with the Lost Generation. This is expressed in the quotation:

“On Sunday morning while church bells rang...the world and its witness returned to Gatsby’s house”(Fitzgerald, 67)

Gatsby in this case represents the lost ones, who are given to be restless and always in search of something more. The dissatisfaction and the hunger for happiness are repressed by consumption and artificial means among the society. There seems to be no escape from materialism as each main character who represents different classes can be followed moving. Some, like Gatsby, try to climb up the stairs or like Myrtle, who chooses to be a mistress to a wealthy man, while some cannot decide, like Nick, or do not have the need to move, like Daisy, for they should already be satisfied with their station in life, although it is apparent that they are not. The attitude of overcoming unhappiness by escaping from reality is clear throughout the novel. Through the observations of Nick and his interactions, the effect of materialism can be observed in the range of possessions, social hierarchy and how the reality is perceived as movement and illusions.

MOVEMENT

In the novel, a constant motion can be observed in the descriptions and the actions of both the characters and the objects. The characters are observed to be moving from one place to another which can be supported by how often the setting changes. Accordingly, Daisy and Tom Buchanan are associated with more than one place such as Cannes, Deauville and Chicago before settling in East Egg. Nick emphasizes how they drift from here and there unrestfully for no particular reason as he places them, in his mind, in wherever people play polo and are rich. The couple's behavior reflects the general attitude inherent in the novel that is "constant movement".

In the expressions used to describe the actions of some of the characters such as Daisy and Tom, the words "*restless*" and "*unrestfully*" appear.(Fitzgerald, 12) These repetitions show the need to change a stagnant life. However, the inclination to alter quickly turns into another stability. The characters seem to carry out this restless attitude through their interactions. Although there is not a significant change of setting, according to Nick, "*people disappear, reappear, lose each other, search for each other and find each other only a few feet away*" without leaving their seats.(Fitzgerald, 43) The temporary nature of these relationships caused by lack of connection can be found in the grand parties thrown by Mr. Gatsby. These parties reflect the mechanisms behind the core of social life in the novel. The guests are separated into groups and as if going through different stages, the wandering girls move from one group to another while seeking the opportunity of rising on top of the social pyramid. Once they accomplish this, they move on to another group and start from the bottom of that pyramid to reach the top.

Similarly, Mr. Gatsby's actions are also taken into consideration by Nick, who observes him to be "*never quite still*" and his heart being "*in a constant, turbulent riot*".(Fitzgerald; 70,105) His behavior can be explained by his personal goal. Mr. Gatsby, who comes from a poor disposition, sets out to accomplish his dream of becoming a high-ranked member of society. His attempt to reach his goal is described as climbing up a ladder and the steps of the ladder are associated with his relationship with Daisy Buchanan. Throughout the novel, Mr. Gatsby constantly moves toward his dream but he never really succeeds.

The descriptions of various objects can be related to the actions of the characters. With the help of personification, a nonliving object can be described in terms of vocabulary which define activity like running or jumping as these words are used in describing the lawn outside Buchanans' house. "*The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a*

quarter of a mile, jumping...reached the house...from the momentum of its run”(Fitzgerald, 12) However, personification does not reflect the reality but only what is perceived and this can be related to the characters as they do not move forward, thus, it can be said that the personification of the objects show the effects of restlessness on how the material world is perceived. Words such as “*run, jump, drift, reach, momentum*” are used in describing the lawn and the expression “*momentum*”, which refers to the continuation of movement, explains how a constant state is sustained. Furniture that is owned by the Buchanans is another group of personified objects. The fact that the only completely stationary object in the living-room is the couch and that it is found similar to an “*anchored balloon*” just after a flight, reflects the unstable nature of the characters on their possessions.(Fitzgerald, 14) The emphasis on material possessions and how objects can be related to the characters turn the focus on materialism in the novel.

MATERIALISM

Throughout the novel, the relationships of the characters and their places in the society are associated with their material power. This is observed as the characters gain from the quality and the quantity of their possessions. Jay Gatz may be given as an example to the change in social standing through financial state. Jay Gatz comes from a poor farmer family but his reluctance to accept his background along with his desire to enhance his circumstances results in his creating an image of himself, in the upper-class, called Mr. Gatsby. These two sides of one man are the opposites of each other. In the novel, whereas Jay Gatz is presented as a penniless soldier, during the time he meets Daisy before she is married, the name Gatsby comes with the most lavish parties. The luxury and the consumption in these parties are made concrete with the image of oranges and lemons that leave the back door of his big mansion: “*Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived...every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves.*”(Fitzgerald, 45) This image can be related to the expression “*he could suck the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder*”.(Fitzgerald,118) Consumption is an important part of luxury for the fact that shows one does not have to care for running out of money. This part of Gatsby makes the reader wonder the source of his sudden and untraceable rise of financial position.

Mr. Gatsby is given as a point, a dream that Jay Gatz wants to realize and uses material means to reach it. In the novel it is mentioned that his sudden wealth can be traced back to selling forbidden liquor at the black market. He also has questionable acquaintances such as Mr.

Wolfshiem, who mistakes Nick as someone who is looking for a “*business connection*”, as Mr. Wolfshiem himself says, before Mr. Gatsby points out that he is not the man, just a friend. In the beginning of this conversation Mr. Wolfshiem mentions a gang murder and after he leaves the table Mr. Gatsby adds that Wolfshiem is a gambler. A gambler who supposedly fixed the World’s Series in 1919, a piece of information that makes Gatsby’s acquaintance with Mr. Wolfshiem unreliable. There are other secretive sides to his business as Nick catches him to be frequently making phone calls. On one occasion, after Mr. Gatsby’s murder, Nick even engages in one phone conversation and learns enough to assume people are “*picked up*” in the most peculiar manner and are “*in trouble*” before he tells the man on the other side of the telephone that he is not Mr. Gatsby and Mr. Gatsby is dead.(Fitzgerald, 173) The phone conversation ends immediately which could lead to the conclusion that the secretive business Mr. Gatsby is in, is dangerous and illegal, if people are afraid someone else is going to find out about their connection.

What gives life to Gatsby can be the class distinction that is common in his society. His relationship with Daisy can be analyzed to bring light upon this social disorder. It is emphasized that when they first meet, Gatz is a penniless soldier whereas “*the largest of the banners and the largest of the lawns belonged to Daisy’s house*”.(Fitzgerald, 81) Even though their relationship appears to have had love in, when the time for Gatz to leave comes, she is not allowed to say goodbye to him. However, it does not last long for her to be engaged and married to Tom Buchanan who shares the same old-money as her and is used to the same lifestyle. This chain of events supports the necessity of Gatsby in a romantic setting but what really proves his existence is how he pictures Daisy to be the face of upper-class, more than herself and less than reality. He makes it more than a romantic memory by putting her on the key role of his dream. In this case, being equal to her and her family and finally having her love will prove his value as a new man. He does not have difficulty in reaching her but he fails in pursuit of gaining her respect because even though Tom and Daisy give the impression that they are not satisfied with each other, which can be based on the number of mistresses Tom has over the years, they do not leave each other but share the old money and status. Even when Daisy confesses her love to Gatsby, she cannot choose Gatsby especially after Tom mentions how unreliable Gatsby’s income is. Gatsby has money too yet Daisy cannot give up a respectable family name and reputation in the society. From Nick’s point of view, Tom and Daisy smash things up carelessly and retreat into their money which is what keeps them together.

Other set of characters that clash with the wealth of the Buchanans are the Wilson couple: Myrtle and her husband. Mrs. Wilson plays the key role between her husband and Tom while dancing between two different classes, meaning that she lives the life of middle-class with her husband but also the life of the mistress of a rich man, Tom, with whom she can spend as much money as she desires. As the wife of a man who owns a garage in the middle of a road between East Egg and West Egg, her dissatisfaction with the middle-class life is expressed through her complaints about how she was misguided by her husband, whom she finds out to be unfit even to “*lick her shoe*” as Myrtle herself expresses it, to believe that he was a gentleman,.(Fitzgerald,41) Tom is the first man she has been with after marrying Wilson. On one occasion, Tom takes Nick out to meet Myrtle and after she excuses herself and leaves her husband, they go to the apartment Tom has bought for her in New York. On the way, her title changes from Mrs. Wilson to Myrtle as she purchases many new products including magazines and cosmetics and lets four taxicabs drive before she selects one. She also has Tom buy a dog for her as a new accessory to the apartment. Her new accessories along with her change of clothes in the apartment reflect a superficial change in her demeanor that is supported by her gestures and assertions which are more pronounced by the minute of her new-found confidence.

In the novel, there are references to discriminatory attitudes derived from the difference in material power. The first reference comes from Tom as he explains a book called “*The Rise of the Colored Empires*” and how “*the white race will be utterly submerged*”.(Fitzgerald,19) This can be taken as an indication that the topic of discrimination will take place although it doesn’t hold more than a few sentences in Tom’s conversation. A similar topic is inherent throughout the novel that is the class distinction between the rich and the poor; and the servants and employers. Even though Myrtle is not above middle-class, she makes it a point to degrade the servants, while in the company of Tom, Nick and her neighbors, to prove her air of confidence and to assert herself as someone above others’ station. While class distinction is superficial, so is the dominance over others’ artificiality which comes in the form of fake and pretentious laughter.

To base one’s life on mere possession does not create a reality of the character. In Gatsby and his parties, in Daisy and Myrtle, the characters do not hold back from laughing and the repetition of the words “*laugh, hilarious, funny*” in the most peculiar circumstances without hilarity makes the reader question what exactly the repeated laughter stands for. If the “*uncontrollable laughter*” is not an expression for humor then it could be interpreted as a

reaction of reflex for it is repeated constantly. This can be taken as the reaction to see things different than what they are, to create an illusion when one is dissatisfied with the reality.

ILLUSIONS

An escape from reality can be seen in the characters. This attitude reflects on objects and how they are perceived. An example can be given from Myrtle's apartment. The only picture in her apartment is the photograph of a hen sitting on a rock. However, it changes into the face of an old lady when looked at from a distance. This exemplifies how the perception of the outer world is distorted. Another example comes in the form of an old advertising billboard in the valley of ashes. The valley of ashes is a stretch of land filled with industrial waste between West Egg and New York City in which ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and ash-grey men "*who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air*".(Fitzgerald, 29) The advertising billboard has a pair of spectacled eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. These eyes without a face take meaning by whomever they are perceived. In Nick's eyes they take the shape of someone who criticizes the moral decadence of America by "*brooding on over the solemn dumping ground*" (Fitzgerald, 29) and in Mr. Wilson's eyes, right after his wife is killed in a car accident, the shape of God, in his catatonic state.

The characters distort not only images of various objects but also their world, in which they hide from the consequences of their actions. Daisy, whose "*artificial world is redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year*", acts accordingly.(Fitzgerald, 157) In a similar manner her attention can easily be dissipated derived from the fact that she is able to jump from one topic to another during her conversations.

Daisy is not the only one who lives in another world but also. Jay Gatz, who is not content with his initial state in the society and who sets out to create another version of himself along with another life. Mr. Gatsby is an illusion in himself. His house, his parties and the romantic speculations he inspires are what makes him Gatsby. People are not invited to his parties, they go there and sometimes they come and go without meeting Gatsby at all. Besides the illusion that his character inspires, he himself lives for another one, the illusion of his American dream which binds itself to Daisy, who portrays the face of upper-class and its joys in his mind. From Nick's point of view, Gatsby goes through different stages through his interactions with Daisy. There are expressions in the novel such as "*the incarnation was complete*" that follow Gatz's dream.(Fitzgerald, 118) In the dream to which he is faithful to the end, Daisy plays a role greater than herself because Gatz's imagination overestimates the redundant reality. It

becomes something he clings to like a safe rock much like “*an instinct towards his future glory*”.(Fitzgerald, 106) Nevertheless, there are moments when Daisy tumbles short of his dreams because “*no amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart*”. (Fitzgerald, 103)

In the afternoon when Mr. Gatsby finally meets Daisy Buchanan, his count of enchanted objects diminishes by one, meaning he faces a part of reality that he has dreamed of for so long and realizes that the colors do not fit the brightness in his mind. His disappointment reflects on his demeanor as nervousness but he does not have the opportunity to reflect his thoughts for he loses Daisy to Tom Buchanan.

It is after Gatsby's death that Nick meets Jay's father who marvels at his son's possessions. He shows Nick a book Jay had when he was a boy in which the last fly-leaf had a schedule that consisted of exercises and studies and work and another list of general resolves that all in all show an inclination to climb up the social ladder.

Conclusion

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel "The Great Gatsby" reflects a general attitude inherent in the time known as the Jazz Era. To understand this attitude, the behavior of the characters and the narrator's expressions concerning these characters are examined. This attitude is compared with the human attributes of today. Before such a comparison, certain points are to be made for the comparison to be based on. As a method, the use of language and the choice of vocabulary are closely examined through quotations from the novel. The results are then categorized under three titles: movement, materialism and illusion. The descriptions of the characters and their objects show the illusion of motion in which the objects are emphasized for their dominance over the novel. These are interpreted to be the rising point of materialism because the characters are ranked in society according to their possessions. As the result of this, the more frequent the mentioning of objects are, the more prominent the influence of materialism on the characters is. However, since objects are not enough to represent people and their lives, it can be concluded that materialism creates an illusion of reality. This is supported by the images created in the minds of the characters along with Mr. Gatsby who symbolizes the biggest illusion, the American dream. Throughout the novel, this dream turns into a form of escape from the material world which is a statement in conflict with itself because this escape is achieved by material means.

It can be concluded that the conflict caused by materialism affects how the material world is perceived. This creates the illusion of movement when in reality nothing changes. Similarly, human nature is constant and therefore, different eras can share similar attributes. The same consumption and social disorder in Gatsby's modern world is still present today.

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